

COMPANY

“Time to go,” said Rachel. Sal followed her out of the low doorway onto cobbles already skinned with frost. She felt every muscle in her body contract as she hurried up the alley along the side of the pub and out onto the high street, then caught up with Rachel on the broad pavement. In the gutters the water was frozen. They marched together up the high street towards the market place where taxis ran their engines beside the fountain.

“Are we sharing a lift?” Rachel asked, waving at the first taxi in line. “We can ask him to do the rounds.”

“No, you go on,” said Sal. “I’ll walk. It was so lovely to see you – and come to Manchester. Come soon.”

“Try and stop me.” They hugged, then hugged again. Sal waved as the taxi pulled away.

The walk to her parents’ house led across the market place, through the gateway in the old town wall, and up a steep, narrow street lined with Victorian cottages in twos and threes. About half a mile from the town wall the houses ended and the pavement narrowed to a kerb little more than a foot in width, separated by a low and leafless hedge from open fields. There, beyond the shelter of the houses, the cold took on a new clarity: it rang from fields hardened by ice, from the black sweep of the lowlands as they fell away from the ridge, from a sky unobscured by cloud or brick.

Past the last cottage and the limits of the town, Sal was so fast in the grip of the cold and the frost and the stars that it was some minutes before she realised that the sharp rhythm of her heels was echoed by heavier, more patient footsteps. She slowed for a second, and was sure: the second set of footsteps was out of kilter with her own. She glanced over her shoulder. A few yards behind her was a tall male figure, his fists in the pockets of his jacket and his head held straight. She felt a quiver of alarm, but told herself, *This isn’t Manchester*, and continued to walk.

Within a few seconds he was immediately behind her, and then stepping out into the road. She thought with relief that he was going to overtake, but he did not. He walked on the road, level with her precisely. She kept her eyes down, and slacked her pace a little. He also slowed.

That was when she stopped, and when he stopped as well. She turned towards him. The upper part of his face was shaded by the peak of his hat, his mouth bracketed by a pair of deep lines that thickened when he smiled.

“Where are you going?” he asked her.

She did not want to answer, but where else could she have been going? The lights of the village glowed at the top of the ridge, and she pointed towards them. “Oakley.” The man nodded, and resumed walking. Behind them the road curled downwards for a quarter of a mile, past bare fields towards the last pair of cottages, their windows in darkness. The only sounds Sal could hear were the footsteps of the man ahead. Slowly she began to follow him. His steps shortened and shortened until they were walking side by side.

“Do you live in Oakley?” he asked.

“I did. My parents do. Do you... do you live there?” His accent was local. Sal remembered her mother telling her that once, before she had learnt to drive, she had been climbing this very hill when a raw-faced man in a car with peeling paint had pulled up and offered her a lift: “A proper local yokel sort,” Sal’s mother had said, “probably completely harmless – but no. I said I liked to walk.”

“I’m not from there,” the man said. They walked on. The lights of Oakley grew no closer, and after a short while disappeared altogether. Sal knew that they had rounded a slight bend and that a bank of trees now blocked the village, but it was hard not to believe that the lights had retreated and would continue to retreat. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched the man’s profile in the moonlight.

“So where do you live now?”

“Manchester. Where do you – ”

“ – what do you do in Manchester?”

“I – well, I’ve got a little boy – ”

“Full-time mum, are you?”

“No.”

“What do you do, then?”

“I teach.” When he said nothing, she added, “Piano.”

“What’s your boy’s name?”

She didn’t answer. She couldn’t: an image of Barney leapt at her so vividly that for a moment he was with her on the road, heavy and hot in her arms, squashing his face into her neck. She could smell him and feel his hair beneath her chin. Heat flared behind her eyes and she thought she was going to cry, but pushed the tears back, and at the same time pushed Barney out of her arms.

No cars passed. The man walked slowly and Sal walked slowly.

The buses that went through Oakley were few, and there was a time when Sal had climbed the hill every day, sometimes twice a day. She had climbed home from secondary school, her rucksack dragging at her shoulder and the incline dragging at her calves, sometimes tearful from the day's arguments and injustices, but mostly just tired. She had climbed home from Saturdays at the shops, from Sundays at the cinema or the park, had climbed home drunk and giddy in the small hours, stopping here and there to vomit into the hedge. She had been climbing the hill up to Oakley, it seemed now, her entire life: the moments in which she had not been on this road were simply interludes.

She half-shouted: "Where are *you* from? Where are you going?"

The man cleared his throat, and named a place she had never heard of. "Is that where you're from, or where you're going?"

"Both, of course."

"So, how far –"

"Just a bit beyond Oakley, of course."

Sal was not truly local, she knew full well: her parents had moved here the year after she was born. Neither of them were local and so, despite seventeen formative years spent here, neither was she; but she knew Oakley, she knew the town, she knew all the villages within walking distance of her own, and she was certain that she had never been to or met anyone from – "Where did you say?"

The place he named then was not the same as the place he had named before.

She had no plan, no solution, and spoke without thinking. "Listen," she said, in a voice that came out like her mother's, "It's nice of you to walk with me – it's nice to have a bit of company – but you know, my natural pace is actually very fast – my comfortable pace. And you know – we're walking a lot more slowly, now, than I usually do, and I'm actually *freezing*, and my parents are waiting up for me and also my son, so I'm afraid I just have to pick up the pace. I can't wait any more and I need to get home."

"I've a bad leg," he said, equably. He was limping; she hadn't noticed the limp before, but it gave her courage. "Well, I'm sorry," she said, "But I need to get home. I really do."

She began to walk faster. He kept up with her. She walked faster still, nearly at a trot, and drew ahead. Her strides grew longer until she started to run, and for a few seconds the gap between the two of them was doubling and doubling, and doubling again. The cold cracked past her cheeks. Then there was a scraping sound and, in the same instant, a spear of pain up

her right leg as the heel of her shoe turned sideways beneath her and she fell, both palms hitting the tarmac.

He was next to her almost before she understood what had happened. His arm linked into hers and, gently, pulled her to her feet. Her palms were bloodied and speckled with grit, and when she tugged away from him and tried to rest her weight on her right ankle, everything in front of her eyes went white. Once more he hooked his arm into her elbow, and eased her forward. She shook his arm away, again tried her foot, and again was dizzyed by pain. When he took her arm for the third time she did not try to fend him off. She leant against him, and gradually they ascended to the edge of the village.

“Nearly there, now.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll walk you to your door.”

The pain in her ankle was beginning to dim as she hobbled beside him into the centre of the village, then down the high-walled lane that led to her parents’ house. On the doorstep he let go of her arm, and in the light of the porch lamp she reached into her handbag. Her fingers were so cold she could scarcely close them around the key.

“Here we are,” he said behind her.

She hesitated. The house was unlit; she saw her father’s glasses folded on the bedside table, Barney sprawled with his chest to the ceiling. Turning, she stood with her back to the door, her bag in both hands. “Don’t wait,” she said; and then, more softly, “Please don’t wait.”

After a moment he took a step off the narrow pavement and into the lane. She said nothing more, and neither did he; but he turned and began slowly, still limping, to walk back towards the centre of the village. As she stood, motionless, the porch light clicked off and he disappeared, indistinguishable from the stones of the high wall. She heard his uneven footsteps fade around the curve of the lane. When she stepped away from the door, and the light clicked on once again, he had gone.